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The Role of the Geographer in CIA

The Geography Division has been examined in detail in a series of monographs that are part of the Directorate of Intelligence Historical Series.^{1/} Those studies document major contributions to the work of the Agency, the intelligence community, and the national security community. They reveal a ready response to changing intelligence priorities, and a product that has been continually refined and improved as a result of the growth in the area expertise of the geographic analysts, the expansion and effective organization of the data base, and the increasingly sophisticated use of research tools and new methodologies.

The role of the geographer in intelligence is not well understood in the Agency. There is a tendency to think of the profession in overly restrictive terms. In breadth of training and scope of expertise, the professional geographer is at least equal to the political or economic analyst. The geographer and cartographer are often confused. The two professions are closely related; in fact, they are opposite sides of the same coin. But the cartographer emphasizes graphic display of the results of research and analysis. The geographer emphasizes textual presentation. To a large extent, the two professions operate jointly -- cartography doesn't go very far without geography, and vice versa.

This essay concerns the geographer -- more specifically the CIA geographic intelligence officer. What is he? What does he do?

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The CIA geographer is an area specialist who applies his specific knowledge of the geographic "realities" of foreign environments to priority intelligence questions. He has a broad interdisciplinary background. And he is a researcher and analyst experienced in the use of a wide range of tools and special methodologies -- including photo interpretation, statistical analysis, map interpretation, ADP, and field study -- as well as the traditional source materials and methods.

The typical analyst in Geography Division is expected to know and understand:

-the basic character and processes of the physical environment, both in general and, especially, as they occur in his specific area of responsibility.
-the composition, characteristics, distribution patterns, and "way of life" of the population of his assigned area.
-the existence, magnitude, and distribution patterns of the natural resources present in his assigned area.
-the processes involved and the locational patterns that have been developed in the economic exploitation of the natural resource base in his assigned area.
-the system of territorial-administrative subdivision used in governing his assigned area.
-the major aspects of the international relations in his assigned area, particularly those that involve territorial and locational matters.
-the strategic and military factors relating to his area of responsibility.

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The CIA geographer must be competent in the use of a wide range of analytic tools, including:

-Ability to present analyzed information effectively in written, oral, and graphic form.
-Ability to interpret maps and charts.

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-Ability to use statistical techniques necessary for research and presentation of data in normal geographic reports.
-Familiarity with ADP and its uses for research and data storage needs.
-Foreign language ability adequate for research in a major language in his area of specialization.

How does the geographer serve the Agency? What does he contribute that is essential or unique? The record is laden with specific instances that answer those questions in the concrete, one-time context. Some of those events are mentioned later. But the contributions of the geographer are broad and general in nature as well as narrow and specific, and an understanding of his role must encompass both dimensions. He contributes wisdom and insight as well as the little-known but relevant fact upon which an operation or a judgment might carry or fall. The brief case studies and general discussion which follow are organized under four headings:

- A. Responding to Intelligence Objectives
- B. Types of Intelligence Production and Support
- C. Relations With Other Components
- D. Future Intelligence Challenges

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A. Responding to Intelligence Objectives

1. Sino-Soviet Relations

The Sino-Soviet border dispute is one tangible aspect of the broader intelligence objective of analyzing the status of Sino-Soviet relations. Division contributions to an understanding and analysis of the border dispute commenced in the early sixties and have included the following items:

- Before the polemics began and the border differences were made public, the Division responded (1961)^{2/} to a request for an assessment of the potentialities for dispute and territorial problems and ambiguities that might trigger disagreement. Historical, legal, cartographic, and current intelligence data were sifted and an evaluation made of potentially troublesome territorial issues.
- When the border dispute openly flared (1963-64), the Division produced two major intelligence memoranda^{3/} designed to provide high-level consumers and briefers with a synthesis of available intelligence. The reasons for dispute and historical, legal, and cartographic evidence were presented; the physical character of the border area was described and the distribution of indigenous groups inhabiting the border area and their significance analyzed; and other factors -- economic, political, and strategic -- were noted and their importance assessed.

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....A Division briefing concerning the timing of a possible military attack and its relationship to terrain and climatological conditions

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....A memorandum^{8/} was prepared when the Soviets announced plans (1970) for economic development of the largest and most strategic of the disputed Amur-Ussuri islands. The principal point made concerned the influence of environmental factors -- which would be considerable -- on announced development plans for the island.

....An updating of environmental constraints on potential Soviet military actions in the border region was compiled for use in a recent NIE.^{9/}

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